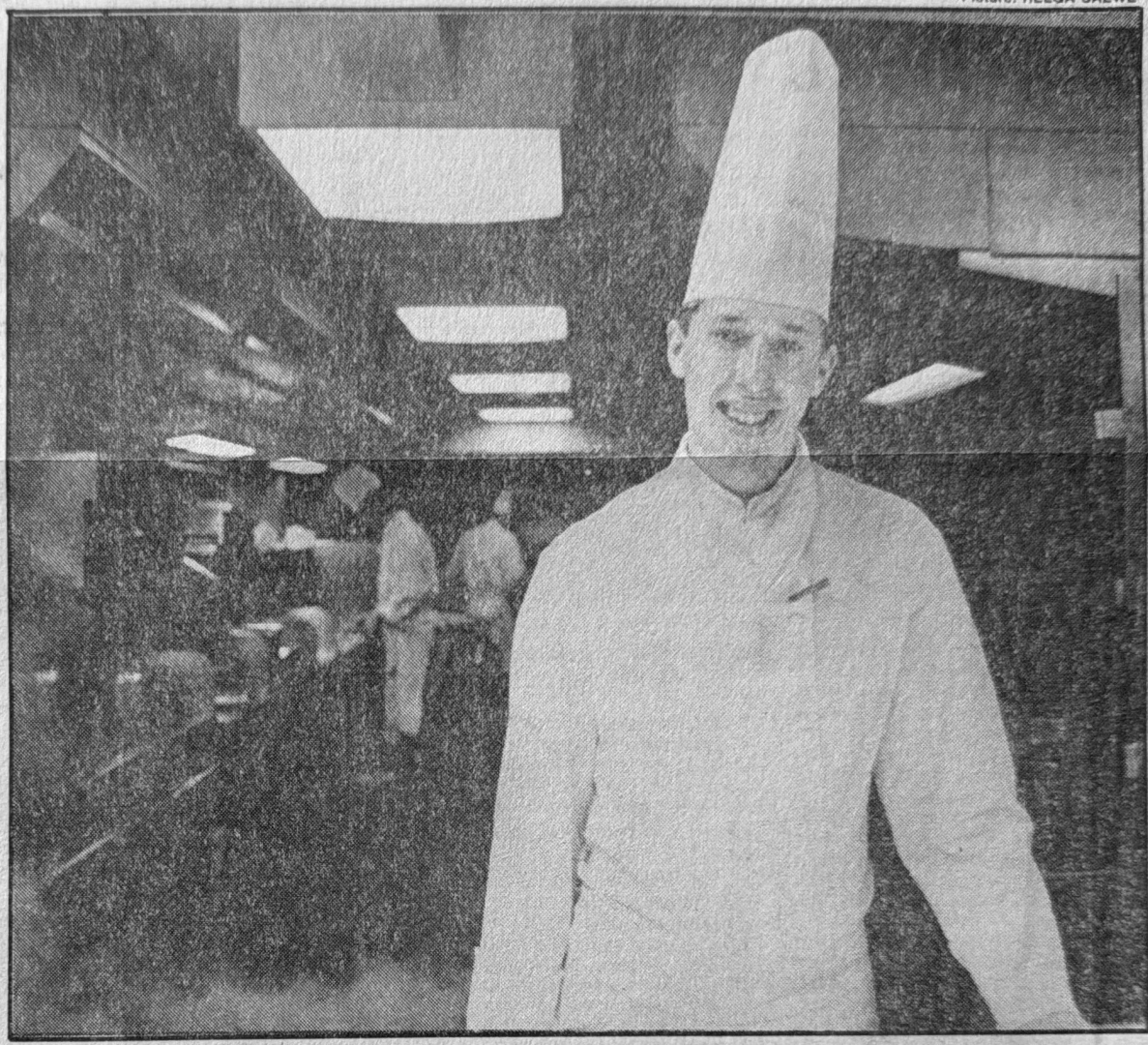
Young chef is chafing at the bit

By GAYLE AUSTEN

Picture: HELGA SALWE



Nicholas Wyman, who has scored a prestigious double — the captain of the gold-medal winning team at the Culinary Olympics and now Apprentice Chef of the year. Now he is chafing at the bit for more overseas experience but plans to return to Australia to spread the knowledge.

TALKING to Nicholas Wyman is a bit like taking on the role of a raspberry bavarois in preparation. He's going to give you all the attention you need, but he's also keeping an eye on the rest of the menu.

This impressive 21-year-old, who has just followed up his captaincy of Australia's gold-medal-winning Culinary Olympics team by earning the prestigious title of Victorian Apprentice Chef of the Year, already has the bearing of a great chef, complete with a steady knife-hand and darting eyes.

He is pleased but humble about his string of successes — "I'd like to think I'm heading in the right direction, but I'm not there yet" — and seems almost more excited at the prospect of another long night in the vast kitchens of the Regent Hotel's Le Restaurant, than the possibility of winning the Australian title later this year.

"I just enjoy working with food," he says, checking his notes and keeping an eye on the person setting the tables. "As I see it, people always have to eat and there's always the need for great chefs, and that's what I aim to be."

Nicholas is smitten with The Regent, where he has spent his apprenticeship, studying at William Angliss and happily immersing himself in the European culture of a big hotel kitchen. Under the tutelage of former executive chef Klaus Lemm, now the owner of Haggers, and current chef Dietmar Sawyere, Nicholas has steadily progressed from chief garlic peeler to the second rung in the strict kitchen hierarchy — the lowly but vital commis chef.

"There is a great atmosphere here that's really conducive to hard work," he says cheerfully. "Of course, you've got to remember that it's not something to be taken lightly, but everyone is really enthusiastic. I don't think you could call it fun at all, but I love it."

For Nicholas, the rigor and creative energy in a serious kitchen is everything. He is dismissive of anything in his past life that sounds suspiciously like ordinary cooking — "Well, I probably held tea parties for my friends, and I used to be in charge of the barbeque at home," he admits. He says he only began to be inspired when he started at The Regent.

"Classic" and "creative" are his favorite words, and the recipe he painstakingly concocted for last week's competition, a White Mousse aux Chocolat... "under a chef's influence", sounds delicious but consists of pithy instructions to "dress the sauce", "make the sabayon", "temper the chocolate", "pipe" and "flood" and "reduce" and "build", that would befuddle any but the most classically trained home cook.

Nicholas swears he can cook a bowl of fettuccine for a travel-weary Regent room-service customer just as easily, and "rumor has it" he's been sighted frying up a traditional breakfast in his home kitchen on a Sunday morning, but his real interests lie with the intricate cuisine, luxury standards and heavy workload of the international hotel circuit.

At the moment, he has the national apprentice chef award in his sights, but his taste of the international scene during the Olympics in Frankfurt last year, combined with the influence of the Regent's own cosmopolitan staff, has Nicholas chafing at the bit for some challenging overseas experience.

Fortunately, this promising young chef has every intention of returning, with the ambition to be among the first Australians to make a friendly assault on their European mentors, who have dominated the local hotel kitchens for many years. "Most of the hotel chefs in Australia are Europeans, but I think there are some Australians who will be executive chefs in a few years," he says. "That's probably because we are improving and developing." And undoubtedly because the contenders are serious young artists like Nicholas Wyman.